

Denver Scholarship Foundation, Denver, Colorado: Financial Aid and Financial Readiness through Counseling, Training, and Partnerships

- *Nate Easley, Executive Director, Denver Scholarship Foundation*

- *Rana Tarkenton, Deputy Executive Director, Denver Scholarship Foundation*

IHEP spoke to Nate Easley and Rana Tarkenton about the Denver Scholarship Foundation (DSF), a Promise organization that guarantees financial aid to eligible underserved students from Denver Public Schools (DPS). These scholarships are leveraged to gain additional financial aid and student supports from partner postsecondary institutions across Colorado. Read this interview to learn about the DSF's large network of K–12, postsecondary, and community-based partners, and how they support financial readiness and affordability through FAFSA trainings and school-based Future Centers.

Goals

IHEP: What are the goals of the Denver Scholarship Foundation?

Back in the early 1980s, the biggest worry students had in terms of college was, “Am I smart enough?” Nowadays, the number-one concern students have is, “Can I afford it?” That’s a whole different situation. In Colorado, affordability is a huge challenge—not just for low-income students, but for all students. The state doesn’t really invest in higher education at a level that most states do. Higher education isn’t seen as a public good, so the expectation is that people should pay for it privately.

The DSF was established in 2006 as a Promise organization. We pledged financial resources to enable students from DPS to attend college and graduate; our mission is college completion for all DPS graduates. This is a place-based scholarship, meaning it’s only for DPS graduates and it’s also only for students going to non-profit postsecondary institutions in Colorado with which we have established partnerships. We don’t fund scholarships at out-of-state colleges or at for-profit colleges, but we will work with students to help them attend the college of their choice.

At DPS, over two-thirds of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Very few of them would complete a postsecondary degree if it weren’t for DSF and our collaborations. We offer college access advising at DPS high schools, and DSF scholarships, which we leverage to get additional financial support for students from our college



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partners. The average scholarship we award to students going to four-year institutions is about \$2,400 per year for up to four years. That scholarship money not only is leveraged to get more institutional financial aid for students but also is leveraged to get students to behave in ways that make it more likely for them to enroll in and complete college. For instance, we have a scholarship policy that requires students to meet other criteria, like applying to three other scholarships and completing the FAFSA. Our college advisors work with current high school seniors, as well as DSF Scholars in college who return for support. We also support outreach to adult learners who are former DSF scholars that stopped out of college, in order to help them re-enroll.

Partnership

IHEP: What kind of partnership agreements do you have with postsecondary institutions?

Today, we have 32 non-profit postsecondary institution partners, all in Colorado. In our student-focused agreements with colleges, we have outcome goals. It’s really important to

sit down with a college president and say, “Relative to the goal we set last year, here is your progress. Here is where you’re doing great, and here is where we need to improve.” It’s about where “we” can improve because we’re in it together. We talk with college presidents about college access and completion rates for low-income, first-generation, and ethnic minority



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students, and—increasingly—students who speak another language at home. Our agreements also help institutions to behave in a way that makes our students successful, because these are written formal documents that we renew on an annual basis. They culminate with outcome goals that say, “Based on this partnership we have with you, this many DSF Scholars will persist from one year to the next, and this many students, who are within [X] credits of graduation, will actually graduate.”

IHEP: How did you develop a partnership with DPS?

At the time, the superintendent was Michael Bennet, who is now our U.S. Senator. We had a 20-to-30-page agreement with the school district; it outlined our partnership—explaining what DFS and DPS are responsible for—and how we can share data with one another. It’s an open-ended agreement, meaning that this arrangement continues until one of the parties gives the other 30 days’ notice to end the partnership.

The school board president was originally on our board at DSF and worked with the school board for support. Principals were also consulted in the development of our program model. Because the partnership really started from the top and didn’t involve every level of DPS, including counselors and teachers, there were concerns about whether DSF was a threat. Some people wondered if we were trying to replace school counselors, now that we were putting college advisors in the schools. But through a lot of work and an amazing, talented program team, we made it clear that we’re not successful without our partners; none of us will succeed without the other. It’s not about egos—it’s about students. Since then, we have become an integral part of the schools, and we are considered members of the team, collaborating most closely with the school counselors, teachers, and other precollegiate service providers.

Implementation

IHEP: How do your college advisors reach out to students?

Usually, there is one advisor per high school, but our advisors at smaller schools often assist those at larger schools. We also have a TRIo Educational Talent Search program that has

IHEP: How else do you engage with students and staff at DPS?

We meet as a leadership team with principals and counseling staff at least twice a year, at the beginning and end of each year. At the beginning, we say, “Here’s how many seniors you have. Let’s set goals. How many college applications? How many scholarships? How are we going to meet with every senior?” At the end of the year, we say, “Here’s how we did this year. We should start thinking about next year.” In most DPS high schools, we also have Future Centers, which are at the core of our college access strategy. They are staffed by experts in financial aid, the college admission process, and postsecondary pathways programs. The advisors meet regularly with school counselors throughout the year to collaborate. Our commitment to DPS is to maintain the Future Centers. Our superintendent says, “For every dollar I invest in DSF, I get \$7 back in terms of college access and completion services.”

IHEP: How do you work with non-profit partners?

We now have 21 non-profit partners that work with DPS. It’s more efficient for us to collaborate with these organizations—they would love to see their kids go to college, too—than it would be to compete with them. No one wins if we’re competing. We basically spell out in each written agreement how we’re going to get a win-win-win: the students win, the organization wins, and DSF wins. So, for example, with Denver Kids, a dropout prevention program, one of the things we say is, “What is our joint goal for how many Denver Kids students should apply for and receive the DSF scholarship?” We are going to set a goal and work in collaboration toward it.



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two full-time and two part-time advisors affiliated with it. We have written agreements with other college access programs in town, and they help us staff several of our Future Centers so that students can always find the support they need. Ideally, even though we would like our advisors to meet with all ninth-

through 12th-grade students, the reality depends on the school. If the school has about 300 students and 70 seniors, maybe the advisor can meet with all the students or do classroom presentations that reach most students. In one of our largest high schools (about 2,500 students), we are heavily partnered with the school counselors, and we focus more on financial aid for seniors while the counselors focus more on college applications. We try to meet the school where they are so that needs are met collectively and collaboratively by DSF, the school counselors, and other precollegiate programs.

Our college advisors use an intrusive advising model to support students—they don't wait for students to come to them. For example, they're tracking which students have and have not submitted the FAFSA, and they give out passes to students to come to the Future Center to work on it. This is possible because the district is very supportive of our work. Advisors also host a number of classroom-based programs and presentations to talk to younger students about affordability and college exploration.

IHEP: What kinds of training and resources do you provide to college advisors?

All of the college advisors work for DSF as full-time professionals. Most of our advisors have a background in TRiO or similar programs, or in college admissions, financial aid, or a combination of those areas. They go through a training program at DSF, which includes ongoing professional development. Our more experienced advisors help other advisors with learning the nuances of scholarship applications. DSF also provides training around the bigger, more complicated scholarships, like the Gates Millennium Scholarship.

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We have a scholarship directory that is updated annually and publically accessible. It has a mixture of local, regional, and national scholarships that DPS students are eligible to apply for, and it has scholarships for both high school students and undergraduates. All of the directory content is imported into the Naviance system—used by DPS for college and career readiness—so our advisors, as well as DPS students and staff, can access all the scholarship information from there.



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IHEP: Are financial aid training and FAFSA workshops provided to advisors and others who work with students?

We offer several financial aid trainings for practitioners every year in January, heading into the FAFSA season. We've partnered with the Colorado Department of Higher Education and our college partners so that financial aid experts present both beginning-level and advanced-level training sessions. We invite our advisors, school counselors, and our precollegiate partners to attend. Some of the organizations that send members include Denver Kids, TRiO Talent Search programs, and state GEAR UP advisors. Not all school counselors are able to attend, but the director of counseling is also invited. The hundreds of volunteers working with our students are invited to these trainings as well. We want to make sure everyone working with our students and families on the FAFSA is doing it right.

All the trainings are scenario based. Over the years we have accumulated a series of actual scenarios that students may face while filling out the FAFSA. For example, our students may have undocumented parents, or the student may be undocumented. We have scenarios of students who are adopted, in foster care, or homeless. We'll give our training participants example students to work with, with fake bios and tax returns. Then, the participants use this information to practice navigating through the FAFSA, all the way from beginning to end.

IHEP: What does it take to host these FAFSA workshops?

The cost is very low; it's mostly the cost of our time. We are gathering people together and bringing in experts to help them work through the FAFSA and talk about different scenarios. I would recommend that communities reach out to their state department of higher education, their financial aid administrators association, and the financial aid offices at local colleges to invite experts to attend their FAFSA trainings. Everyone is happy to help because everyone wants this to be done correctly, as it benefits students and families.

Impact

IHEP: What are some of the biggest impacts you've seen since partnering with DPS?

Our tagline is “It’s possible.” There is now a belief in Denver that it’s possible for first-generation, low-income students of color to attend college and graduate. We have data that show it’s happening right now. It’s not just a matter of having this system in the high schools, the school district, and the colleges; this belief also exists for students who have seen their siblings, cousins, friends, and neighbors graduate from college.

Through our Future Centers and our work with DPS and our partners, we reach about 17,000 students and their families every year. We have awarded more than \$25 million in

scholarships to more than 4,600 students. We’ve seen a 30 percent increase in college enrollment. Over 1,000 scholars—mostly first-generation students—have graduated from college or technical school. We’re raising expectations because we don’t accept failure. We hold ourselves to a very high standard. Right now, three-quarters of the students in whom we have invested through scholarships, are persisting in college or have graduated. That’s impressive, but it’s not good enough. If out of 4,600 kids, about 1,200 of them start but stop college, then it’s on us to figure out a way to get those 1,200 students back in college.

Looking Forward

IHEP: Would you like to offer any last words of wisdom to communities working on establishing community partnerships?

Before you go to a meeting with a partner, think carefully about what they are getting out of this relationship, not only your objectives. Make sure you congratulate them on their success and wisdom. You also have to constantly work on it; you’re never completely “there.” Just when you think you’ve got it, there’s a call from someone who is unhappy about something. The fact that we have these partnerships means we have a marriage license: we care about each other, so we’re going to sit down and work it out. That’s true for anybody in the college access and success business. Our position is “We need you, so let’s get through this.”

Tools

Denver Scholarship Foundation Calendar Priorities

This calendar helps students prioritize financial tasks through a sample timeline of deadlines.

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Hosting a FAFSA night

This initiative was created by the U.S. Department of Education to help communities host FAFSA events. Communities can set goals; select locations, dates, and times; choose presenters; advertise events; gather handouts; carry out the event; and assess its success.

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Financial-Aid Template

Another tool developed by the U.S. Department of Education highlights how to calculate estimated cost of attendance and payment options, and explains basic financial aid terminology. This handout can be used by counselors and mentors.

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Adult Student Checklist

Also created by the U.S. Department of Education, this checklist is designed for adult students, to help them prepare academically and financially for college. The checklist also includes helpful links that provides additional information.

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Additional Resources

The FAFSA Project: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment and Next Steps (2013: Eric P. Bettinger, Bridget T. Long & Philip Oreopoulos)

This project studies the effectiveness of an intervention that streamlines the financial aid application process and students' access to individualized assistance, using a random-assignment research design. The project found that college attendance and persistence increased following the intervention.

FAFSA Completion by High School (2015: U.S. Department of Education)

This online database provides information about FAFSA completion rates organized by state or territory that include the school name and city of the high school. Whereas high schools previously relied on self-reported surveys to estimate FAFSA completion rates, Federal Student Aid now provides data on FAFSA submissions and completions to help high schools track their progress and work to ensure students complete FAFSA applications on time.

Federal Student Aid Resources (2015: U.S. Department of Education)

This website provides publications, fact sheets, online tools, and additional resources for school officials, parents, and community leaders, to help students prepare and pay for college. This resource includes information on college preparation and the Federal Student Aid Programs, FAFSA application, loan information, and consumer protection.

The Impact of Institutional Grant Aid on College Choice (2012: College Board)

The probability of enrollment at highly selective private postsecondary institutions increases by 1.66 percent per \$1,000 of institutional grant aid offered, with this effect being particularly salient for students with the greatest financial need.